

Confession as a Daily Buddhist Practice

By Kathy Wesley. Based on teachings by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche given during the 10-Day Mahamudra Retreat in July, 1999.
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Purifying negativity is a basic theme of Buddhist philosophy and practice. According to the teachings of Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha of our era, each being has mind, the basic nature of which is purity, goodness, compassion and wisdom. This basic nature, often called “Buddha Nature,” is the basis for the experience of perfect compassion and wisdom called enlightenment.

But while all beings possess this “seed of awakening,” it is often obscured by negativity—negative conflicting emotions (called “kleshas” in Sanskrit), habitual tendencies, and the belief in a solid, permanent and unchanging “self” and environment.

These obscurations lead us to commit negative actions, which (according to the Buddha’s teachings on karma, cause and result) bear fruit as the suffering of cyclic existence (called “samsara.”)

So, to uncover our basic nature and to stop accumulating negative karma, the Buddha taught that we should:

1. Do away with negative actions;
2. Practice virtuous actions; and
3. Tame the mind (through meditation).

On a daily basis, Buddhists strive to become more aware of their thoughts and actions and to see how those thoughts and actions shape their experience and their world. They also strive to stop performing negative actions and to purify negative actions they have already done, while at the same time strengthening positive actions, and expanding the positive actions they already are performing. By doing this, they eliminate negative karma (and its attendant suffering) and increase positive karma (and its attendant happiness).

They also remove obscurations, allowing the Buddha Nature to become more manifest.

The Practice of Confession

One of the most powerful means for purifying past negative actions and eliminating future negative actions is the practice of Confession. Shakyamuni gave teachings to his followers on the power of confession, and confession was a regular feature of the daily prayer life of his followers.

We can practice confession ourselves on a daily basis. Daily confession helps us confront our faults, become more aware of how our actions affect others, and short-circuit our habitual tendencies. As we do this, negative habits lose their grip on us, our obscurations slowly lift, and we become more “in touch” with our Buddha Nature and our potential for spiritual awakening.

Confession, according to Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, is “seeing what you have done as being wrong and purifying it.”

We make confession by reciting a confession liturgy, such as the “Lama Vajra Holder...” confession, or the “Sutra of the Three Heaps” confession (also called The Prayer of the 35 Buddhas) with our speech, while practicing what are called The Four Powers with our minds. It is said that if these Four Powers are practiced with complete sincerity, any negativity can be purified.

The Four Powers are:

1. The Power of Reliance. We sit in the presence of a representation of the Buddha and bodhisattvas, or visualize them in front of us. We rely upon them as objects of refuge and as witnesses for our confession. The Buddha and bodhisattvas are suitable witnesses for our confession because they are both flawless and compassionate.
2. The Power of Renunciation. Next, we review our actions, and, understanding them to be wrong, we feel intense regret for having done them. In essence, we renounce our negative actions, which

have harmed others and interfered with our quest for Buddhahood.

3. **The Power of Remedy.** We recite the liturgy of confession with the conscious intention that it remedy and repair the wrong. (We don't just mouth the words—we speak them from the heart.)
4. **The Power of Resolution.** In our recitation of the liturgy of confession, we resolve not to commit the negative actions ever again. Without this resolution, our confession is not effective.

After reciting the confession liturgy, we should rest our minds in the understanding that we have practiced The Four Powers completely and that our negativities have been purified. “To the extent that your practice of confession is sincere, the negativity will be purified,” Rinpoche says.

Rinpoche says that daily confession is a beneficial practice for all Buddhists, and that if we have time, we should try to recite a confession liturgy every day. “It is important to do this daily, so that our karmic imprints (from negative actions) don't take root, don't grow and don't bear fruit,” he said.

According to Rinpoche, we can confess both negative actions and negative thoughts, as both acculamate negative karma.

In addition, he says that we can “expand” our confession by confessing the wrongdoing of not just ourselves, but of all sentient beings, and by praying for the purification of our wrongdoing and the wrongdoing of all sentient beings. That way, our confession is “embraced with Bodhicitta,” (Bodhicitta being the compassionate wish to obtain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings) and becomes more powerful.

Additional Remedies

In his book, “The Great Path of Awakening,” Jamgon Kongtrul the Great, a 19th century Kagyu master, wrote about the Four Powers and gave a list of practices that can be done as part of the Power of Remedy to purify negative actions:

“The force of full engagement with remedies is the use of prayers that put an end to hope and fear, and the practice of the six kinds of remedies: meditation on emptiness, repetition of mantras and dharmas (prayers that foster recollection of bodhicitta and guard against its neglect), the making of images (clay or plaster sacred images using proper sacred proportions and designs), performing the seven-branch prayer and offering mandalas, the recitation of sutras and the repetition of special purification mantras.”

While it may be difficult for us to meditate on emptiness, since that requires a great deal of training and preparation, it is very easy to perform the other means of remedy.

A copy of the Seven-branch offering prayer is included with this packet, as are copies of two confession prayers.

A Special Means of Purification: The Vajrasattva Mantra

In addition, the Vajrayana teachings of the Buddha contain a special means for purifying negativity: the 100-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva.

According to Khenpo Rinpoche, the mantra is composed of seed syllables that are the embodiment of 100 “families”—all of the deities of the Vajrayana. Vajrasattva (Dorje Sempa in Tibetan) has vowed that his mantra would have the power to purify even the most terrible misdeeds, so it is among the most powerful means we have for purifying negative karma and obscurations.

The Tibetan word for mantra, “ngak,” implies power, meaning that the words themselves are powerful. But our attitude and intention in saying them is crucial, as well. So, any mantra can bring about purification, if you think it will. But Vajrasattva's mantra is especially powerful.

In the practice of the Four Extraordinary Foundations (Ngondro), an entire visualization practice is given to go with the mantra. This visualization makes the mantra even more powerful, but for those of us who are not yet doing that practice, the mantra by itself is

powerful enough to purify our negativity—even if we say it informally, at the moment when we commit a negative action.

It is good to recite the Vajrasattva mantra to purify negative actions as they occur during the day, but it is still best to recite a confession liturgy each day, because there are some negative actions we might have missed!

The Seven-Branch Prayer

Adapted from Ken McLeod's translation in The Great Path of Awakening by Jamgon Kongtrul

With complete faith I bow
To all the victorious ones and their children
Who abide in the 10 directions and three times.
I offer flowers, incense, light,
Perfume, food, music, and many other things,
Both in substance and with my imagination.
I ask the noble assemblage to accept them.
I confess all evil actions that I have done,
Influenced by the defilements,
From time without beginning until now:
The five that ripen immediately,
The ten non-virtuous acts, and many others.
I rejoice in the merit of whatever virtue
Shravakas, pratyekabuddhas,
Bodhisattvas, and ordinary people
Gather throughout the three times.
I pray for the wheel of the dharma to be turned,
The teachings of the mahayana and hinayana,
In ways suitable for the different aptitudes
And motivations present in sentient beings.
I ask the buddhas not to pass into nirvana,
But, with great compassion and
Until samsara is completely empty,

To look after all sentient beings
Who drown in this ocean of sorrow.
May whatever merit I have accumulated
Become a seed for the enlightenment of all beings.
Without delay, may I become
A splendid leader for sentient beings.

Sutra of the Three Heaps

*Also called: Repentance in Front of the 35 Buddhas
Taken from the book, Taking the Bodhisattva Vow, by Ven. Bokar Rinpoche, and Maintaining the Bodhisattva Vow and the Bodhicitta Precepts, by Lama Lodro.*

Introduction

The Sutra of the Three Heaps (Sanskrit, Triskandharma Sutra; Tibetan, P'ungpo sum pai do), also called Bodhisattvas' Repentance of Transgressions, or Repentance in Front of the 35 Buddhas, is a practice that purifies the transgressions of vows in general and the transgression of the Bodhisattva Vow in particular.

Its origin is as follows. A group of 35 monks, having taken the Bodhisattva Vow, inadvertently provoked the death of a child when they were on their begging rounds. Wishing to purify themselves, they asked Upali, one of the closest disciples of the Buddha, to request from his master a method of appropriate repentance. The Buddha uttered a brief sutra, in which the 35 Buddhas are mentioned, relating to the 35 monks. It is said that at the moment Shakyamuni Buddha uttered this sutra, his body radiated a powerful light within which 34 Buddhas appeared and circled him in space. (Shakyamuni Buddha is counted as one of the 35 Buddhas.) The 35 monks prostrated, made offerings, awakened Bodhicitta within their minds, and took refuge in the Buddhas. They repented their faults, and by this very fact, attained the Bodhisattva's stages of enlightenment.

The recitation of this sutra is quite common among Tibetans. Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, is famous for having made 100,000 prostrations in front of each of the 35 Buddhas.

The “Three Heaps” contained in the sutra are:

- The Heap of homages
- The Heap of repentances
- The Heap of dedications.

The Sutra of the Three Heaps

For ever, I and all beings take refuge in the guru

We take refuge in the Buddha,

We take refuge in the Dharma,

We take refuge in the Sangha.

To Shakyamuni, the Perfect Buddha, the Conquerer, the Holder, the Transcendent One, the Thus-Gone, the One Victorious over the enemy, I pay homage. To the one who has fully conquered with the diamond essence, I pay homage.

To Jewel Radiating Light, I pay homage.

To Sovereign King of Nagas, I pay homage.

To Leader of Heros, I pay homage.

To Glorious Joy, I pay homage.

To Jewel Fire, I pay homage.

To Jewel Moonlight, I pay homage.

To Meaningful Vision, I pay homage.

To Jewel Moon, I pay homage.

To Stainless One, I pay homage.

To Glorious Giving, I pay homage.

To Pure One, I pay homage.

To Giving of Purity, I pay homage.

To Water Deity, I pay homage.

To God of Water Deities, I pay homage.

To Glorious Goodness, I pay homage.

To Glorious Sandalwood, I pay homage.

To Infinite Splendor, I pay homage.

To Glorious Light, I pay homage.

To Glorious One Without Sorrow, I pay homage.

To Son of Nondesire, I pay homage.

To Glory of Flowers, I pay homage.

To Thus-Gone Clearly Knowing through the Play of Pure Radiance, I pay homage.

To Thus-Gone Clearly Knowing through the Play of Lotus Radiance, I pay homage.

To Glory of Wealth, I pay homage.

To Glory of Vigilance, I pay homage.

To Renowned Glorious Name, I pay homage.

To King of the Victory Banner that Crowns the Sovereign, I pay homage.

To Glorious One Who Fully Subdues, I pay homage.

To Perfect Victor in Battle, I pay homage.

To One Gone Beyond through Complete Victory, I pay homage.

To Glorious Array Eternally Illuminating, I pay homage.

To Lotus Jewel Who Fully Subdues, I pay homage.

To Thus-Gone, Conquerer of the enemy, perfect Buddha who dwells on a lotus jewel, King of the Sovereign Mount Meru, I pay homage.

To these and to all the Thus-Gone, the victors over the enemy, the perfect Buddhas, the Conquerors, the Holders, the Transcendent Ones who dwell and live in all the worlds of the universe extending in the ten directions, to all these conquering Buddhas, Holders, and Transcendent Ones, I request that they pay heed to me.

During this life and lives that had neither beginning nor limit, in all the realms of existence of samsara that I have traveled through, I have accomplished negative acts; I have made others accomplish them, and rejoiced at causing others to accomplish them.

I have stolen property belonging to stupas, to the sangha and property of the sangha in the ten directions; I have made others steal them, and have rejoiced at causing others to steal them.

I have committed the five acts of unlimited consequences; I have made others commit them, and I have rejoiced at causing others to commit them.

I have fully engaged the path of the ten unvirtuous acts; I have led others to engage it, and rejoiced at causing others to engage it.

Covered by these various karmic veils, I will go to the hells; I will go to the animal realms; I will go to the

hungry ghost realms; I will be born in places far from the Dharma; I will be born as a barbarian; I will be born among the gods of long life; I will not have all the sense faculties; I will follow false views; I will not know to rejoice at the coming of a Buddha.

All the veils coming from these acts, in the presence of the conquering Buddhas, Holders, and Transcendent Ones, who have wisdom, who have vision, who are witnesses, who are truth, who know, who see; I acknowledge these acts, I do not conceal them, I do not hide them, and I promise to abstain from committing these acts from this time forward.

Conquering Buddhas, Holders and Transcendent Ones, I request your attention. During this life and during lives that had neither beginning nor limit, in all the realms of existence of samsara that I have traveled through, all the sources of virtues that I have obtained from giving, whether it is only a mouthful of food given to a being born in the animal realm, all the sources of virtue that I have obtained from the observance of ethics, all the sources of virtue that I have obtained from keeping pure conduct, all the sources of virtue that I have obtained from my own acts to make beings fully ripen, all the sources of virtue that I have obtained from generating sublime Bodhicitta, all the sources of virtue that I have obtained from unsurpassable wisdom, having gathered them, having brought them together, having accumulated them, I dedicate them to the unsurpassable, to the highest of the highest, to the best of the best, I completely dedicate them to the supreme and perfect Awakening.

In the same way as the conquering Buddhas, Holders, and Transcendent Ones of the past have accomplished perfectly their dedication, in the same way as the conquering Buddhas, Holders, and Transcendent Ones who have not yet come will accomplish perfectly their dedication, and in the same way as the conquering Buddhas, Holders, and Transcendent Ones of the present now perfectly accomplish their dedication, in the same way, I also accomplish the dedication perfectly.

I repent all negative acts, I rejoice in all merits, I address my exhortation and prayer to all Buddhas.

May I obtain the unsurpassable, sublime, and holy wisdom. Whoever are the sublime human beings, the victors who live now, whoever are those who have come and even those who will come, I praise their qualities. In front of them all like a limitless ocean, I join my hands, and completely place myself under their protection.

I confess each of all the ten unskillful actions I have done, be they the three physical, four oral or three mental ones. I confess the ten unskillful actions and five acts of limitless consequences and all the negative actions I have ever committed while my mind has been overpowered by ignorance from time without beginning until this moment.

I confess each and every non-virtue I have committed with my body, speech and mind while overpowered by desire, hatred and bewilderment. By means of this presentation of the Confession of Faults, may the five acts of unlimited consequences and whatever other negative actions I have done while overpowered by ignorance, be completely purified.

All faults of all we sentient beings from our bad karma, being repented, may they never be done again. May all the veils of karma be completely exhausted.

By making prostrations, offerings, repentance, rejoicing in good deeds, by calling for the turning of the Dharma wheel and praying for the teachers to remain, whatever may be the portion of positive karma I accumulate thereby, I dedicate it all to enlightenment.

Confession Prayer

*By Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye,
from the extended version of the Nyung-ne Text*

Great Lama, holder of the dorje, Buddhas residing in the ten directions and all Bodhisattvas, please look upon me.

I, (your name), since the time of beginningless samsara until now, through the power of the conflicting emotions of anger, attachment and bewilderment, have committed the following negative activities of body, speech and mind: the ten non-virtues, the five immeasurable negative acts, the five moral faults,

breaking the Vinaya vows, violating the Bodhisattva's training, breaking the Vajrayana vows, being unfaithful to the Three Jewels, being disrespectful to teachers and master, being disrespectful to pure friends practicing good conduct, abandoning the holy Dharma, using Dharma for personal gain, casting aspersion on the noble Sangha, and so on.

In summary, I have committed negative activity that blocks the higher realms and causes one to fall into the lower realms. I have commanded it to be done and rejoiced when it has been done by others. I now invoke the great Lama, holder of the dorje, the Buddhas residing in the 10 directions and all the Bodhisattvas,

and completely admit and confess (all these negative acts) without hiding or concealing anything. I vow hereafter to never do them again. Through admission and confession, happiness is maintained. If faults and negative activity are not confessed, happiness cannot arise.

Short Vajrasattva Mantra

OM BENZA SATTO HUNG

